

Yesterday was the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, and also the day of the first major demonstration against President Lukashenko since the fraudulent elections on March 19. Early on Wednesday, opposition candidate Aleksander Milinkevich was brought to police headquarters before the rally and warned by the KGB the consequences of holding the rally and asked to sign a document stating that he knew what would happen should the rally continue.

Mr. Milinkevich boldly refused. And then today around 12 p.m. in Minsk, Mr. Milinkevich was giving an interview to reporters when the police showed up and took him to the police station. He was charged with organizing an unsanctioned rally with regards to yesterday's rally in Minsk and received a 15-day sentence.

Also this morning, two other UDF leaders, Sergiy Kalyakin, the Chairman of the Communist Party, and Alexander Bukhostov, leader of the Belarusian Labor Party, were summoned to the City Executive Committee of the Minsk Interior Affairs regarding their application to hold another prodemocratic rally in Minsk on May 1. They were then taken by police to the police department and charged with organizing yesterday's unsanctioned rally in Minsk. Mr. Bukhostov received 15 days in jail, and Mr. Kalyakin received 14 days.

And perhaps the most terrible and intimidating incident I have heard of occurred yesterday prior to the rally in Minsk. Prior to a speech at the rally, opposition activist Anatoly Lebedko was kidnapped, beaten and interrogated for several hours by members of the KGB, which we can only assume was ordered by the office of President Lukashenko. Mr. Lebedko was given a message by these thugs when he was shoved out of the car outside of Minsk. All they had to say was, we hope you have drawn the appropriate conclusions from this.

However, the conclusions that I and the Belarusian people have drawn is that despite these continued threats from Lukashenko, the spirit of freedom has not died in Belarus. All these people wanted to do was hold a peaceful rally to honor those Belarusians who died in the Chernobyl accident, and to come together as a country.

President Lukashenko may have tried to stop the rally through these intimidation tactics, but even if only one person had shown up despite this ongoing threat of violence, it means that freedom lived within the hearts and minds of these people, and someday it will come to them again.

I am proud to say, Mr. Speaker, that yesterday in Minsk, thousands of Belarusians rallied in support of freedom.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BROWN of Ohio addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

THE WAR IN IRAQ

Ms. DELAURO. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to speak out of order.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Connecticut?

There was no objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Connecticut (Ms. DELAURO) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. DELAURO. Mr. Speaker, 1 month ago the American people stopped to remember the third anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war. We thought first and foremost of the selflessness, patriotism and heroism by our troops, our National Guard and Reserves.

We also remembered those who have been wounded in battle, and who need our support more than ever. And we never forget those whose service meant giving their lives for their country.

Americans are united in this remembrance, but so, too, Mr. Speaker, do Americans understand that we need a new direction in Iraq, that Congress must take up its responsibility and demand that our policy be based on honest assessments from our own military.

For too long the U.S. military's leadership has been ignored and stifled by a White House motivated by its own political and ideological agenda. Indeed, when General Eric Shinseki told Congress in 2002 that we would need almost 400,000 troops to ensure a short and peaceful occupation, administration officials said he was wildly off the mark and quickly forced him into retirement.

Earlier this year, when General Casey conceded that U.S. forces were stretched, the Pentagon rushed to issue a clarifying statement. And when six former generals who worked closely with Secretary Rumsfeld called for his resignation, the President wasted no time reiterating his unyielding support for Mr. Rumsfeld.

Mr. Speaker, I wish I had confidence that this White House and Secretary of Defense could look beyond their ideological agenda to do what is right for our national security and our troops, but I do not, which is why I believe the responsibility to take the lead on Iraq now falls to the Congress.

Yes, Congress was delinquent for too long in its oversight responsibilities in the prosecution of the war, writing blank checks to the administration with no requirements for progress or accountability to the taxpayers, but in declaring that 2006 should be a year of transition in this year's defense appropriation bill, and in finally requiring regular status reports from the administration, Congress at last showed that it might be serious about handing over the security of Iraq to the Iraqi people.

Unfortunately, 4 months into 2006, as insurgent violence occurs daily, that

process has still not begun, with no regular hearings, calls for accountability or investigations. The result is that American troops find themselves increasingly in the crossfire of warring religious groups. Just last weekend eight more U.S. troops lost their lives. And the President now says our troops will be in the middle of this Iraqi civil war at least until 2009.

Mr. Speaker, as we go into the fourth year, it is well past time for a firm plan to redeploy our troops. This is consistent with the views of our troops, nearly three-quarters of whom say 2006 is the year to succeed or reassess. It is the view of the top U.S. commander in Iraq, General George Casey, who told Congress, our troops are "one of the elements that fuels the insurgency."

So the starting point for new policy is to be serious about making 2006 a year of transition, and signaling to all of the parties in Iraq and the region that they must take responsibility.

We must hear the advice of our own military about how to best reduce troop levels without fear of reprisal from the administration. We must have a timetable for a phased reduction of our troops, ensuring a minimal presence within 12 months, with most redeployed by the end of 2006. We must expand the training of Iraqi military and police units, and demand that they be linked to a reduction in American forces.

We must establish a contract, as we did in Bosnia, requiring the key powers in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Jordan, to be more actively involved in security and reconstruction. Iraq's neighbors must understand that they have a stake in its success.

We should redeploy our National Guard to help with homeland security efforts. In coping with disaster, bird flu or another terrorist attack, our National Guard must be prepared. But a third of Louisiana's Guard was in Iraq during Katrina, slowing relief efforts with deadly consequences. And over 500 of my State's National Guard troops are deployed in Afghanistan, because the regular Army remains in Iraq in such large numbers.

And with respect to Afghanistan, where the Taliban is resurgent since U.S. troops were diverted to Iraq, we should refocus our efforts there and resume our work to stabilize a country that has provided the base for global terrorism.

Taken together, this new policy will produce a minimal but flexible U.S. troop presence in Iraq within a year. That is how we best maintain a strong military, while making America more secure. Our troops deserve a Congress that takes its oversight responsibilities seriously, not one that acts as a rubber stamp for a White House who is clearly off track.

Our troops are bearing the burden of our indecision. We owe them a full and open debate and a new direction. It is not a matter of partisanship, but a matter of patriotism of our country's stewardship and security.